

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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NOVEMBER 27TH, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,

The whole nation has been moved to sympathy with the sufferings of Coventry. The attack revealed afresh both the spirit and resource of our people and the savagery and senselessness of modern war. Grievous as is the loss of the beautiful mediaeval cathedral, the celebration of the Holy Communion as usual on the following Sunday in the drawing-room of the Provost reminds us that the living home of the Christian faith is in the wills and affections of men and not in the monuments of their hands.

A headline in a Sunday paper, splashed in large letters over the front page, ran: "Please God, you will avenge what was done to us that night." The words are reported to have been whispered in the ruined cathedral to a young airman in a pilot's uniform. To such contrary meaning can the faith which inspired the building of the cathedral be turned.

We believe that for the sake of the political well-being of mankind the war must be stubbornly prosecuted. Modern methods of warfare require that the enemy's supplies of material be bombed from the air. Through such action the lives and homes of the common people in Germany will be destroyed. But we do not desire this suffering and loss of life; we have no heart to exult in it. It does nothing to alleviate our sorrow for those who have been stricken in our own land to know that homes have been desolated in Germany. If Christianity means anything, it means that the heart of Christ grieves with the same tenderness for every German or Italian child that is killed or maimed as for every child who suffers in Great Britain. Unless we hold to this truth through the passions of war, there will not be enough pity and compassion to rebuild the shattered world.

THE SPIRIT OF KINDNESS

The immensity of human need is revealing the fund of kindness in the hearts of men, whether it be God's gift to ordinary human nature or draws its conscious inspiration from Christ. An illustration which has recently come under my notice is worth recording, not only for what it is in itself but because it is symbolic of much else that is going on to-day.

A small group in Oxford, as the result of a study of housing conditions, set to work a year or two ago to help people who were moved out from slum dwellings to new Council houses to obtain furniture at a low price. Friends were asked for superfluous furniture. What was not suitable was sold and the money used to provide blankets. When the war came, and evacuees began to pour into Oxford, many of them were billeted in unfurnished rooms provided only with palliasses. The group, with the sympathy and support of the local authorities, began to tackle the new problems thus created. Up to the present 101 families have been supplied with furniture provided by 138 persons. There is a long waiting list and an approach has been made to the local Churches to help in the extension of the effort.

It sometimes seems that, since most works of mercy and philanthropy have in modern society been taken over by the State, there is little scope left for specifically Christian

activity. Actually, as this illustration shows, there are endless fields in which the initiative and ingenuity of individuals have their part to play and the human touch of person with person can richly supplement the more impersonal provision of the State.

THE CHRISTIAN VICTORY IN THE ROMAN WORLD

I was given as a present when I arrived in Oxford a copy of *Christianity and Classical Culture* by C. N. Cochrane (Oxford University Press, 30s.). I have not for long read a book which has so strongly gripped me. It is a masterly account of the causes of the triumph of Christianity in the Roman world. The fundamental reason was that the leading Christian minds were convinced that the Graeco-Roman tradition was demonstrably unable to provide an answer to the riddles and demands of life, and that in Christ they had found a principle of understanding superior to anything in the classical world. It seemed to them that the Graeco-Roman attempt to establish security, peace and freedom for mankind through political action guided by natural human reason had plainly broken down. They staked everything on the conviction that in the Christian revelation they had discovered a deeper truth, which gave a meaning to life and provided an adequate basis for a true humanism. In the sober judgment of the historian their faith was the victory which overcame the world. They had found that clue to living, which is the supreme contribution of Christian faith to the life of man in society.

MR. MIDDLETON MURRY'S CHALLENGE

Mr. Middleton Murry's *The Betrayal of Christ by the Churches* (Andrew Dakers, 5s.) is a book which those who want to understand the religious meaning of the present situation, and are willing to have their complacency disturbed, ought to read. I do not agree with all that Mr. Murry says, and I am sure that for a true view much that receives no mention has to be brought into the picture. The situation is not quite so simple as it is made out to be, but that is no excuse for evading the issues Mr. Murry raises. Unless the Churches are prepared fearlessly to expose their minds and hearts to these issues, the picture which he draws of their condition may prove to be not far from the truth. I have little doubt that to some of you who may read the book my commendation of it will come as a shock. But we shall have to get used to a good many bad jolts before the Church becomes sufficiently awake to become in a saving sense the salt of society.

Yours sincerely,

H. De laan

Correction—The price of the Oxford pamphlets was erroneously given in the last issue to be 6d. each. It should have been 3d.

Subscriptions—The rate of subscriptions to the News-Letter is 12s. 6d. (\$3.0 in U.S.A. and Canada) for one year, and 6s. 6d. (\$1.50 in U.S.A. and Canada) for six months, and 3s. 6d. for three months.

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, ARLOSH HALL, MANSFIELD ROAD, OXFORD.

NOVEMBER 27TH 1940

THE DEMAND FOR A CHRISTIAN LEAD

There is a widespread demand for what is commonly expressed as "a more definite Christian lead." The purpose of this Supplement is to examine what is meant by this demand and how it can be met.

THE GIVEN-NESS OF CHRISTIANITY

The first thing to be said is that, if Christianity is true, the lead has already been given. It is not something to be anxiously sought, but something to be accepted and rejoiced in. "The grace of God, bringing salvation to all men, has *appeared*." That bare assertion leaves a host of questions still to be answered. But its meaning is inexhaustible and it is decisive in regard to the whole discussion.

In other words Christianity is a *faith* before it is an ethical demand or an ideal for society. It is a faith about the ultimate meaning of life by the light of which we are able to live. It is faiths rather than ideals that move the world. Children, it has been said, tend to adopt the beliefs of those whom they instinctively recognise to be happy; meaning by happiness not natural high spirits but the serenity of those who know what they believe and find it good. The business of moral exhortation is largely a waste of effort. The effective lead is not that of those who are consciously striving to give it, but of those who through communion with an unseen reality become the channels of an inflowing grace and power. Eternal life in the Christian view is a present possession; something to be experienced here and now. Regenerating influences enter into society through those who have been redeemed into a new order of existence. Having found an inner peace and victory they become centres of life and healing. This is the distinctive and fundamental contribution of Christianity to the regeneration of society.

It is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God as a present reality, into which men may enter, and by entering find release from their sins and power to live in the world as sons of God. From this much else follows. But if this foundation is ignored, there is little to distinguish Christian efforts to reform society from those of others.

IS THERE A CHRISTIAN PROGRAMME?

In passing on to the question, What more? the first step is to ask what it is that is sought. Christianity does not profess to give an answer to any question we may choose to ask. We cannot take for granted that it offers to society a specific programme for ordering its political and social life, or that it provides a clear and direct alternative to Capitalism, Communism or Fascism. I do not believe that it does. It is certainly possible for a society to arise, the activities of which would be sufficiently directed to Christian ends and impregnated with Christian values to justify its being described, in contrast with pagan societies, as a Christian society. But what the Christian faith offers to men is something quite other than the blue-prints of such a society.

There is not the least reason why a negative conclusion should be discouraging. In many circumstances it renders a valuable positive service. To be assured that there is no road in a particular direction may save hours or years of fruitless effort. The discovery that a particular aim is mistaken sets us free to get down to our real job. For the following reasons the question whether Christianity has a specific programme to offer to society must (as I think) be answered with a decisive, No.

The central demand of Christianity is for a conversion of the mind. The only advice

it can give to a society which is pursuing false ends is that the ends must be changed. So long as a society clings to these ends all attempts to solve its problems must meet with frustration. A programme based on Christian values executed by those who do not accept these values is inevitably distorted into something else. If this happens, the unrecognised rift between profession and practice begets a fatal insincerity, which blinds men to what they are actually doing. It is absurd—to take an extreme instance—to offer advice to a gangster, whose trade is robbery and murder, how to conduct his profession in a Christian manner; he must cease to be a gangster.

There is a loose use of the term Christian in relation to public policy which must be got rid of, if we are to come to grips with the real problems. I read some time ago a paper pleading for the making of a Christian peace. I am at a loss to understand what a “Christian” peace can mean in the world as it is today. Many of those who will have to share in the making of the peace openly repudiate the Christian interpretation of life. At the very best the peace, if it is to be a good peace, must take a realistic account of the factor of *power*.

Secondly, I do not doubt that there are Christian criteria or standards by which the practice of a society may be judged. I tried to indicate in *The Resurrection of Christendom* (Sheldon Press. 1s.) what some of these are. But the terms in which they can be formulated are necessarily general and abstract. When we try to embody them in policies or institutions we have to take account of a very complex body of facts. To understand these facts and to estimate the probable effects of any proposed action are matters of rational judgment. Christians are no better qualified than others to read the facts rightly and, if they advocate a policy on Christian grounds and are wrong in their estimate of the facts, the consequences will be bad. Illustrations will be found in Sir Alfred Zimmern's *Spiritual Values and World Affairs* (Oxford University Press. 7s. 6d.).

Many people arrived at what they believed to be a Christian view of policy in regard to Spain or Abyssinia. On the data

at their disposal the judgments were sincere Christian judgments. But it is another question whether the data were complete or whether the judgments took account of all aspects of the total situation. The complexity of the facts must make us chary of claiming in such matters that the judgment is necessarily a Christian judgment, i.e. that it is a conclusion binding on every Christian. Individual Christians have to act in politics as Christians; their political judgments must be formed in the light of their Christian conscience. But their political decisions are made on their individual responsibility (or the responsibility of a like-minded group) without committing the *Church* as such. When we come to vast social and political systems the complexity of the facts increases beyond the grasp of finite minds. We can see and fight against particular evils, including fundamental evils. We cannot foretell how a whole network of laws and institutions will function when they have to be worked out by all sorts and conditions of fallible and sinful men.

Thirdly, God has reserved the direction of human affairs in His own hands. It is not given to man with his finite intelligence to order the course of world-events. The attempt to do so is presumptuous. Man's task is to act responsibly in the sphere allotted to him, leaving the result in God's hands. (To avoid misunderstanding, let me say plainly that I believe that in modern society this means for some the devotion of their lives and abilities to the large-scale planning of society.)

We must avoid the false, and therefore irreligious, simplification of the infinite complexity of human affairs by trying to compress it into abstract systems. The best thought of our time seems to be moving to a realisation that the many-sided, luxuriant life of mankind cannot be made to conform to any single abstract scheme. To quote the words of one of the acutest sociological thinkers of to-day: “The prejudice of the dogmatic thinker must be cast aside that only systems based upon the extreme application of one single principle really work. Just the opposite is true. Social reality has always been a mixed system, a combination

of different principles brought to harmony. We may learn from all the existing social experiments, including Capitalism, Communism and Fascism, so long as we know what is right and what is wrong with them. Instead of the 'one way trafficking of the mind' in politics, we should incline to the analytical and experimental attitude of our age."

I do not propose, therefore, to offer to you in the News-Letter what profess to be Christian blue-prints of a social or international order. That would be to delude you with a mirage instead of reality. This is no bar to the examination in the News-Letter from a Christian standpoint of particular proposals for reconstruction in both the domestic and the international fields.

A CLUE TO LIVING

This statement of what Christianity does *not* promise is intended to clear the ground. We can turn now to the positive service which Christians can render to the world in its present need.

Let it be repeated that the primary business of the Church is to make Christians. Unless there are persons who have found something to live by that illuminates for them the meaning of life, that gives them solid support in its struggles, that works in them with dynamic energy, there is no living force to change society.

But the individual does not exist in a vacuum. His life is lived, and can only be lived, in a network of relationships. Christianity in teaching us the truth about man provides a clue to the understanding of his natural life in society. The proper business of the Church is to bear witness to that truth. This is the definite "lead" which the Church ought to give.

I tried in the supplement to C. N.-L. No. 45, entitled "The Way Out," to indicate the general direction of that lead. I suggested that the clue to the modern situation is found in the fact that man has forgotten that he is—*is*, not ought to be—a dependent being. The forgetfulness of this truth of his being, and the consequent violation and perversion of his essential nature, is the root cause of the evils from which society is

suffering. The one sure remedy is to live our way back to a state of things in which man is reunited to the true sources of his being. My reason for believing this to be a real clue is that it is not simply one of the many stimulating ideas thrown off by fertile brains, but is a truth which sensitive minds are coming more and more to perceive to be the meaning of the history of recent centuries. Western man has embarked from the time of the Renaissance on an adventure of discovery and conquest inspired by certain assumptions about himself—assumptions that he is lord of creation and architect of his own destiny. Life itself is proving to us that these assumptions are false.

The great service which the Church might, if it were worthy, render to mankind is to help towards bringing about a fundamental re-orientation of outlook. The truth of man's dependence has to be worked out by thinkers in a massive social philosophy. The most thorough study of social conditions and forces is also indispensable. We cannot have too much social research of the right kind. This is a task to which some must devote the blood and sweat of a life-time; the dilettante contribution of amateurs is valueless.

It is equally necessary that a true understanding of man's dependence should become part of the furniture of the mind of the common man. Society, as it exists, is the resultant of an incalculable multitude of decisions and acts of innumerable individuals. The only way in which society can be organically changed is by a progressive change in the decisions and acts of these individuals in carrying out their ordinary jobs, large or small. Those who have the Christian scale of values will in fact change things and change them in a fruitful way. Secular schemes of reform, which look all right on paper and even seem thoroughly Christian in their aims, often work out in practice quite differently from what was intended, because there is at their heart an unrecognised erroneous understanding of human nature.

If men are to act effectively together, they must, of course, define their common aims. One of the necessary tasks to be taken in hand is to provide practical guidance in regard to the concrete problems of social life, e.g., in

industry and the professions. What is unprofitable is to waste valuable time in framing schemes for an imaginary world instead of changing a bit of the real world by altering the decisions and acts that are within our immediate control.

The News-Letter will give all the help that it can through the sharing of experience to those who are striving in this way to change their immediate environment. Through this mutual encouragement, stimulus and support we may hope to advance together to a clearer understanding of the meaning of Christian community—an understanding which comes not from abstract thought but from living experience and action.

THE BATTLE FRONT

The battle will be won or lost in the field of action. If Christianity does not encourage the formation of utopian schemes, still less does it tolerate acquiescence in things as they are. The Christian's business is to fight the devil and all his works. A Christian philosophy will lack all bite unless it attacks fearlessly the falsehoods of existing society. It is not given to us mortals to lift ourselves out of the struggle of human existence and from a detached vantage-point create a pattern of what society ought to be. That is God's affair. To us is given a humbler but heroic task—to recognise untruth and denounce it; to see evil and attack it; to perceive what is wrong and find out the means of setting it right.

The basal fact in the present religious situation is that the free, responsible person, living in community with other persons, whom the New Testament has in view, has in modern society to an alarming degree ceased to exist. There is a relatively small number of privileged persons, including those who have private means and many clergy and teachers, who have considerable freedom to direct their own lives. But for the vast majority who are directly engaged in econo-

mic activities, most of their acts and nearly all the consequences of their acts are outside their conscious control. Society has become inhuman, and most of its members cannot live, as God meant them to live, as responsible persons serving one another in a genuine community. In such a society the Gospel is bound to appear unreal.

The importance of Mr. Middleton Murry's *The Betrayal of Christ by the Churches* lies in the force with which he drives home the reasons why Christianity is widely felt to be irrelevant to the life of to-day. The root of the indifference of multitudes of ordinary men to the Church is that they know that the sins which are destroying men's lives to-day are not so much the sins of individuals as the sins of society, and that they do not believe that the Church has anything to say about these sins.

There are two fundamental denials in modern society of the Christian truth about man. These Mr. Murry believes, in my view rightly, to be the vital core of the religious situation. One is the violation of man's nature as a person by the prevailing economic system. The other is the denial of universal brotherhood which finds its expression in militant nationalism.

We shall keep both these issues in the forefront of the News-Letter. Each has endless aspects, both theoretical and practical. These must be taken up separately as opportunity offers. One important aspect of the first issue which has been given prominence in the News-Letter is the shameful neglect by the nation of the welfare and education of its youth. The second issue has been raised in what has been said about the treatment of aliens. Christianity stands or falls with the recognition that the fundamental thing in an individual is not his nationality but his humanity. Part of the lead which the News-Letter will try to give will be to focus attention on these crucial issues.

J.H.O.

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